Sidon: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Phoenician City

By Charles River Editors



A picture of Sidon and the Mediterranean coast

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Introduction



A picture of the Crusader castle at Sidon

Sidon

Of all the peoples of the ancient Near East, the Phoenicians are among the most recognizable but also perhaps the least understood. The Phoenicians never built an empire like the Egyptians and Assyrians; in fact, the Phoenicians never created a unified Phoenician state but instead existed as independent city-state kingdoms scattered throughout the Mediterranean region. However, despite the fact there was never a "Phoenician Empire," the Phoenicians proved to be more prolific in their exploration and colonization than any other peoples in world history until the Spanish during the Age of Discovery.

The Phoenicians were well-known across different civilizations throughout the ancient world, and their influence can be felt across much of the West today because they are credited with inventing the forerunner to the Greek alphabet, from which the Latin alphabet was directly derived. Nonetheless, the Phoenicians left behind few written texts, so modern historians have been forced to reconstruct their past through a variety of ancient Egyptians, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman sources. It’s not even clear what the Phoenicians called themselves, because the name “Phoenician” is derived from the Greek word “phoinix”, which possibly relates to the dyes they produced and traded (Markoe 2000, 10). The mystery of the ancient Phoenicians is further compounded by the fact that archaeologists have only been able to excavate small sections of the three primary Phoenician cities: Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre.

For centuries, the port city of Sidon served as the capital of the Phoenician homeland, the administrative center of their maritime trading network, and the holy center of one of the most popular Levantine religious cults. Located in southern Phoenicia about 30 miles south of the present-day Lebanese capital of Beirut, the settlement has a narrative that stretches far into the depths of prehistory. The oldest archaeological remains date from the second half of the 4th millennium BCE.

The history of Sidon, as with other Phoenician cities, constantly fluctuated between freedom and subjection. Its privileged geographical position on the coast was the source of its commercial development and its openness to foreign cultures, but in doing so the prosperous city became coveted by numerous conquerors. It passed through the successive influence of Egypt, the neighboring Phoenician city-state of Tyre, and eventually flourished under Persian rule as the seat of a satrap for the whole Euphrates region. The Persian king frequently made use of the renowned Sidonian fleet during his military campaigns, and the kings of Sidon were greatly rewarded for their services. During the campaigns of Alexander the Great, Sidon opened its doors to the young Macedonian, who chose to depose the long lasting dynasty of

Sidonian kings. It later became the battleground between the Arab caliphates and European Crusaders during the Middle Ages in a conflict that in many ways continues to shape the region to this day.

Like many other cities in the Levant, Sidon has been continuously inhabited over the centuries, and despite the transformations brought by multiple civilizations that succeeded the Phoenicians, the city maintained a thoroughly ancient identity and original character into the modern period. Nonetheless, much of its ancient history remains shrouded in mystery, not only by a lack of systematic archaeological excavation but also because much of its heritage has been lost through conflict and looting by treasure hunters throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. To this day a great amount of Sidon's archaeological assets are the property of foreign museum collections. This has made it particularly difficult for historians to uncover, let alone identify and interpret, the physical elements of Sidon's history.

Sidon: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Phoenician City chronicles the tumultuous history of one of the most important cities of antiquity. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Sidon like never before.

The Prehistoric Origins of Sidon

Sidon lies on the coast of the modern state of Lebanon, between the eastern Mediterranean Sea and a narrow fertile plain irrigated by numerous streams and rivers that originate from the nearby hills and mountains. This was the crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa. The political and commercial centers of power were concentrated on the coast, the most significant being Sidon, Tyre, Beirut and Byblos, yet several important towns existed inland as well, the most important of which was Baalbek, which lay north east of Sidon close to the modern border of Syria.

The unique landscape of Lebanon was an important factor in the earliest development of Sidon, and the Phoenicians at large. This part of the Levant features a variety of eco-zones, from arid hilltops to lush plains. Two mountain ranges dominate the land, each rich in precious resources. Mount Lebanon is the westernmost range straddling the Mediterranean coast, with the Anti-Lebanon Mountains stretching along the Syrian border to the east.[1] Between them is the Beqaa Valley, a fertile landscape which has served as the primary farming area of the region throughout history.

Sidon itself developed on a peninsula jutting into the Mediterranean Sea, about 30 miles south of the present-day Lebanese capital of Beirut. The city mostly developed on the northern side of the main hill, protected to the north and west by the sea. On the southern side was a small river.[2] The site benefited from two natural harbors protected by a chain of small islands and reefs.[3] One of these was a double harbor, a second mouth in the bay leading to a harbor within a harbor. In this inner basin ships could be safely anchored during the winter months, and the shipyards could easily access the vessels for repairs.[4]

Previous excavations at the site of Dakerman, less than a mile to the south of Sidon, have shown that although the earliest settled inhabitants of Sidon lived there in roundhouses during the Chalcolithic period, at some point at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age they moved north to the site closer to Sidon's natural harbor.[5] From the ongoing excavations, six levels of Early Bronze Age occupation have been found,[6] and the earliest of these sits on the sandstone bedrock. It appears to have been used as a necropolis by the residents of Sidon for much of its history.[7]

From around 3000 BCE there was a slow and steady growth in urban development, commercial activity and trade in the area. Ceramics imported from Egypt have been found in the vicinity of Sidon, and there was evidently an increase in the manufacturing of jars made for export.[8] These testify to the ancient city's expanding role in international trade.

Moreover, a close connection existed between Sidon and the northern city-state of Byblos. This is indicated by the discovery of a jug decorated with a figure of a ram on the rim, similar to a twin cult vessel found at Byblos.[9] Such a vast number of whole ceramic jars have been found on the site that it is believed Sidon served as a site of mass-production for these utilitarian vessels; the particular type of jar made in Sidon has been found at archaeological sites throughout the Levant. Additionally, the discovery of cylinder seal impressions at Sidon with similar themes to those found at Byblos lends credence to the interaction between these city states from an early period.[10]

The full flowering of the Early Bronze Age at Sidon saw the development of large buildings used for storage and domestic activities on the peninsula. A large, mud brick building consisting of seven rooms was discovered in 2003. Many jars were found on its floor, very near a narrow storage space believed to have been a grain bin.[11] There were distinct traces of burning on the floor of some rooms. One room generally assumed to have been a cooking area had a basalt basin, a limestone quern in a distinctive curved

shape, and a basalt mortar that was full of blackened ashy soil when it was first discovered by archaeologists. In 2007, the building's rectangular storerooms were uncovered, and found to contain large amounts of pottery and burned wheat.[12] Over 300 pounds of charred grain were uncovered, as well as a layer of plaster which covered the floor of the building and which sealed the heaps of grain (most likely used to repel rodents and insects). In general, storage facilities were centrally located and situated in a position that would serve the community, and as these facilities lay in the vicinity of Sidon's harbor, where loading and unloading of commodities could have taken place even from the earliest periods of human settlement, it has been concluded that the peninsula was being intensively settled by this time.

An abundance of animal remains dating from this period have also been found in the area. Although around half were of domesticated bovine or ovine species, the rest were of wild animals that were hunted, including deer, wild boar, aurochs, hippopotamus, lions, and bear.[13] What makes this surprising is that hunting for food was not common in the Southern Levant at this time because domesticated species were being bred efficiently enough to feed the city's population. Nevertheless, there are numerous signs of butchering, particularly on the hippopotamus remains, including cut marks typically made by knives and axes.[14] The absence of any skulls from these beasts suggests that they were removed and used or discarded elsewhere, perhaps in an industrial or artisan area where the bone and ivory would have been used to create decorative objects.[15]

Either way, it's notable the game selected was uncharacteristic for hunters who were only looking for meat; if food alone was the objective, they would not have sought out the most dangerous animals. One explanation for this may have been prestige, ideology or religion – rather than pure economics – that motivated these hunts; the sign of an early form of social stratification and elite classes.[16]

Above the Early Bronze Age period of occupation, archaeologists discovered a thick layer of sand that had been deliberately laid there, indicating a change in function of the site. The Middle Bronze Age period has traditionally been attributed to the occupation of the Levant by the Canaanites.[17] At the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age a large part of the settlement was used as a cemetery.[18] 60 burials have so far been found, some of the earliest of which were graves dug into the sand. These were mainly of warriors buried with weapons, ceramics and animal offerings. Child burials were also present, their graves containing a selection of weapons and jewelry.[19]

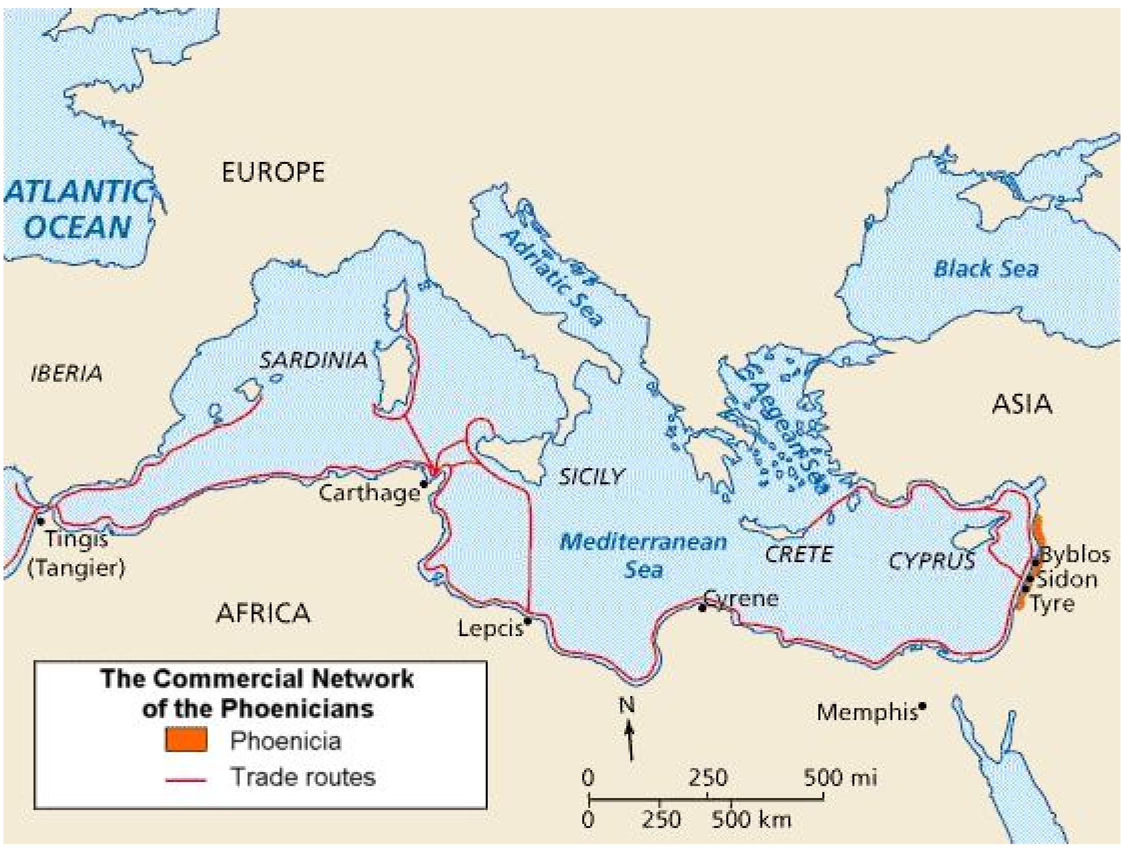
Such weapons did not represent the military equipment of armies, but that of an elite group. They were symbols of the heroic warrior – a phenomenon that occurred throughout western Asia from the beginning of the second millennium BCE.[20] The axes were generally found behind or near the skull, which indicates that they were carried resting on the shoulder. One axe was unique in that it had a false socket with a knob on either side.[21] Because of this it clearly had no practical use, and was probably solely used for ceremonial purposes.

One grave held a skeleton that has been nicknamed “the Silver Man” because of an abundance of silver jewelry with which he was adorned, alongside a more usual array of grave goods. These included a silver band around his head, a silver belt, silver bracelets, and silver studs arranged in a circle around an axe head.[22] Analysis of this silver has established that the most likely source of these artifacts was the central Taurus Mountains in Anatolia.

By around the 19th century BCE, children were buried in jars in this cemetery.[23] For the past five years the bones from Sidon have been painstakingly studied by osteoarchaeologists. Although many of the adult remains from Bronze Age Sidon are badly preserved, those of the children are amazingly well preserved. Grave goods in these interments included scarabs, beads, and ceramic vessels. In the jar

burial of a 13 year old juvenile was a single bronze arrowhead. The mouth and neck of these jars were usually broken and removed in order to insert the deceased, with their head often placed at the base of the jar. These burials were either primary or secondary, meaning that the body had already decomposed elsewhere, and only afterwards were the human remains placed in the jar and buried. One constructed grave contained the remains of a 15 month old child together with disarticulated adult bones. A bronze knife with a hoof-shaped handle had been placed on top of animal bones. Though well preserved, the knife was not robust enough to have been used as a weapon; instead, it has been associated with the presence of meat offerings in the grave.[24]

The Phoenicians



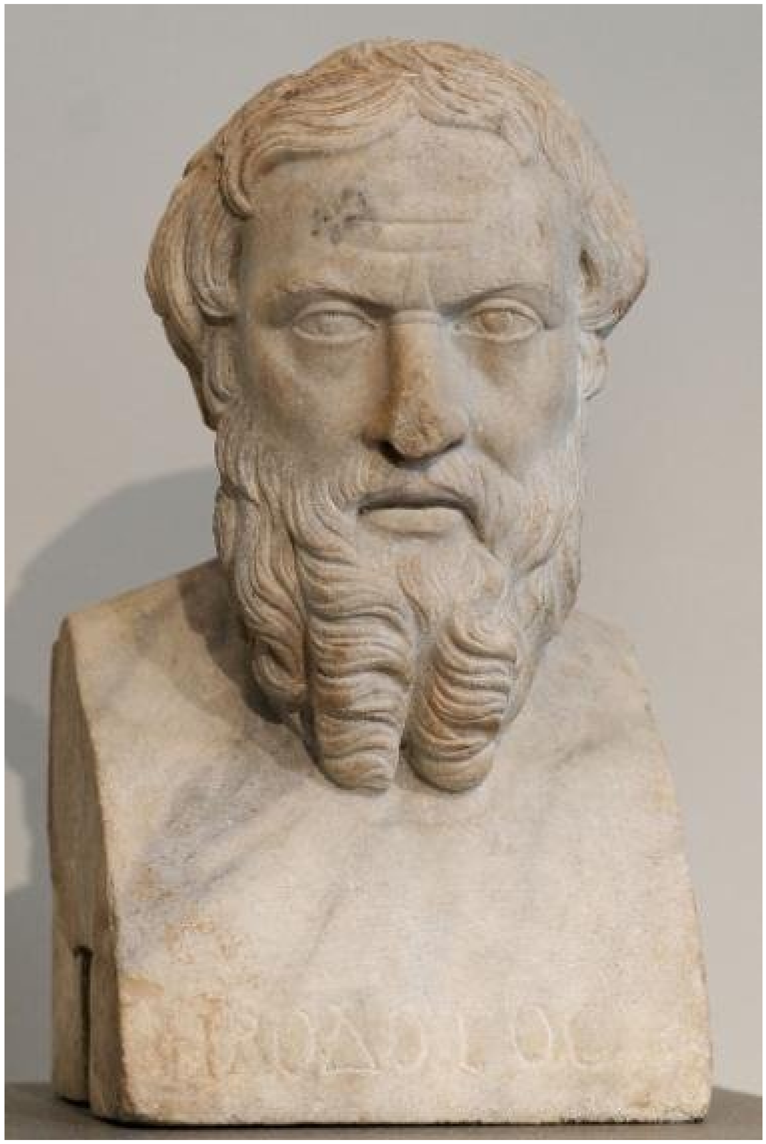
A map of Phoenicia and Phoenician trade routes

Since the Phoenicians never developed a historiographical tradition like that of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, determining

their origins is problematic at best and can only be approached through a combination of philology, historiography, and archaeology. Of course, it must also be remembered that when scholars analyze the historical texts of other peoples who wrote about the Phoenicians, they have to keep in mind that foreign writers likely had biases about the people they were describing.

Nowhere is this concept more apparent than in the Bible, thanks to two verses from the Old Testament that cast the Phoenicians in a negative light: “And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethba’al king of the Sidonians, and went and served Ba’al, and worshiped him” (1 Kings 16: 30-31). Unfortunately, these two verses have been used throughout history to depict the Phoenicians as licentious heathens, when the reality is that many other Biblical verses depict the Phoenicians as being quite adept in the arts of ancient statecraft and oftentimes allies of the Israelites (as will be discussed further below).

Another ancient historical source that is questionable in its accuracy of Phoenician origins (but not as biased) comes from the 5th century BCE Greek historian Herodotus. In his seminal *Histories*, Herodotus wrote, “These people came originally from the so-called Red Sea: and as soon as they had penetrated to the Mediterranean and settled in the country where they are today, they took to making long trading voyages. Loaded with Egyptian and Assyrian goods, they called at various places along the coast including Argos, in those days the most important place in the land now called Hellas” (Herodotus, *Histories,* I, 1). Although most scholars discount the Red Sea origins of the Phoenicians, who occupied the Levantine coast of the Mediterranean Sea during ancient times, Herodotus’ account of Phoenician trade and colonization can be corroborated by multiple primary sources.

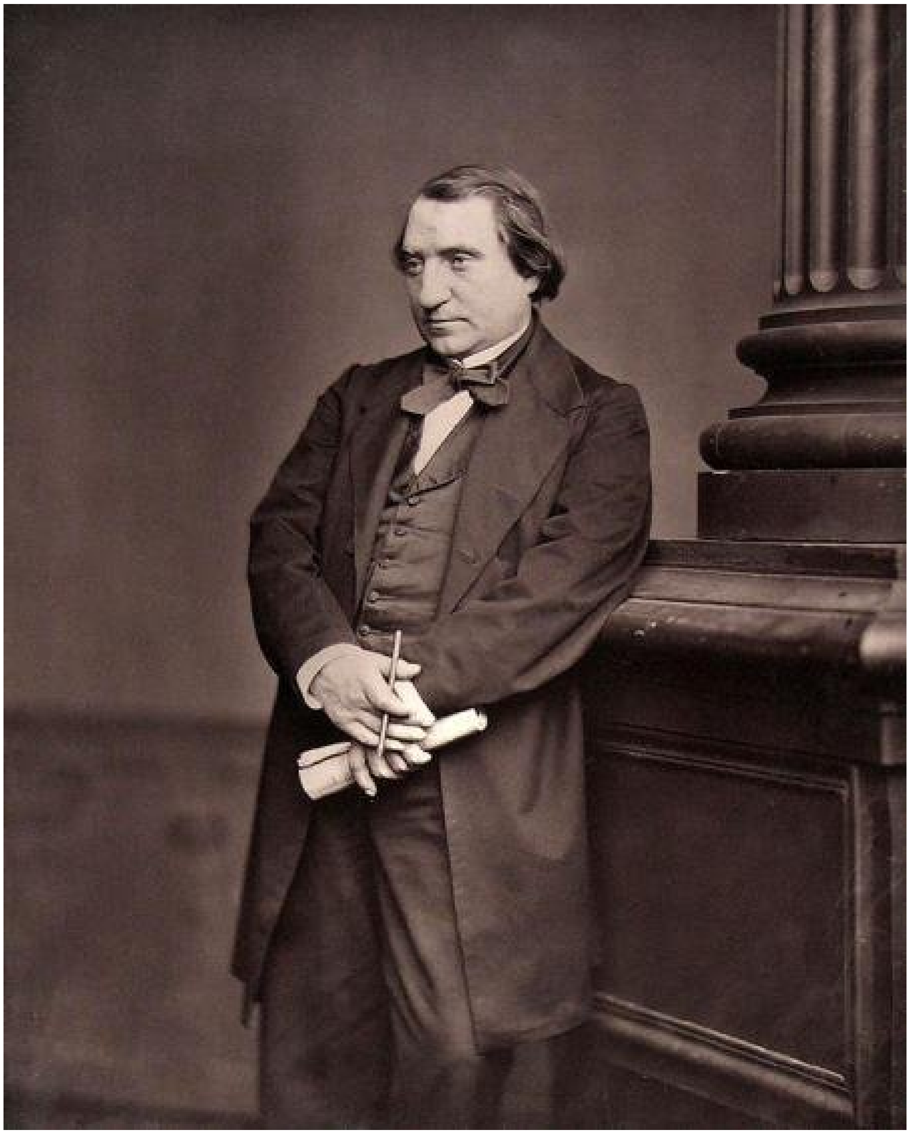


A bust depicting Herodotus

Today, scholars believe that the origins of the Phoenician people can be traced closer to their homeland of Phoenicia, and they have generally used the ancient Phoenician language as a way to determine the ancient civilization’s origins. The ancient Phoenician language was Semitic and very closely related to Hebrew and Aramaic, which were the other two major ancient Semitic languages of the Levant (Moscati 1968, 91), and due to the linguistic similarities, scholars believe that the Phoenicians shared a common ancestry with the Hebrews and they were both known as Canaanites before they became Phoenicians and Israelites (Markoe 2000, 10).

Although philology has allowed the linguistic origins of the Phoenicians to be unlocked, their geographic origins will continue to be debated until more conclusive archeological evidence is discovered. The Phoenician culture owed much of its historic importance to the varied characteristics of the landscape that was their homeland. Sometimes arid and sometimes incredibly lush and fertile, the territory was a mosaic of varying landscapes. This sliver of country teeters between the two mountain ranges that run in parallel to the coast, rich in natural resources and freshwater springs.[25] Lebanon's flora was an essential element to its patrimony, and in particular that which was found in the mountain regions. Mount Lebanon is the westernmost range, reaching over three thousand meters above sea level at its highest peak. The mountain chain was once richly forested in cedar woods. This range is faced by the Anti-Lebanon Chain to the east, which reaches a maximum height of a little over two thousand eight hundred meters above sea level along the border between Lebanon and Syria. The fertile Beqaa Valley is nestled between these two ranges, where a whole range of cereals were cultivated from ancient times.

The modern discovery and study of the ancient Phoenicians did not begin in earnest until 1860, when Emperor Napoleon III of France led a punitive military expedition into Lebanon against members of the Islamic Druze sect, which had just massacred members of the Maronite Christian sect (Herm 1975, 27). Perhaps inspired by his grandfather, Napoleon Bonaparte, who led both French troops and scholars into Egypt in 1799, Napoleon III brought his own scholars, namely Ernest Renan, to study the ancient ruins of the cities of coastal Lebanon (Herm 1975, 27).



Ernest Renan

Unlike Egypt, which has a number of intact ancient monuments for scholars to study (especially in Upper Egypt), the major ancient Phoenician cities had been thoroughly built over in medieval and modern times, but this problem did not deter Renan, and his efforts later drew other renowned historians and archaeologists to Lebanon. After World War I, when Lebanon was briefly ruled by the French under a League of Nations mandate, more scholars traveled there in order to try to unlock the mysteries of Phoenicia, and the most famous early 20th century scholar to study the ancient Phoenician ruins was the esteemed French Egyptologist Pierre Montet, who

used his knowledge of ancient history and modern archeological techniques to uncover some monuments from Byblos (Herm 1975, 29).



Pierre Montet

Although World War II and modern development hampered extensive archaeological expeditions of the major Phoenician cities, Renan and Montet's early efforts helped to open Phoenician history to the modern world. It was soon revealed that the three cities of Byblos, Tyre, and Sidon were the backbone of ancient Phoenician culture. Most of the ancient Phoenician cities were located along the coastline of what are today the modern nation nations of Israel and Lebanon, with Byblos being the farthest to the north, Tyre at the south end, and Sidon between the two.

According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, Phoenician cities had been founded so long ago that a thriving cult of Herakles existed in Tyre by at least 2750 BCE.[26] Ancient Egyptian stories tell of a group of "sea peoples" that invaded the Levant around 1200 BCE, who were believed to have mixed with the Canaanites and created the Phoenician culture.[27] Historians still debate how much of

an impact these "sea peoples" had on the development of the Phoenicians as the greatest sailors in the Mediterranean, because archaeological evidence shows that the Phoenicians already had a special connection to the sea, trading and traveling as far back as the 2nd millennium BCE. The Canaanites are a people mentioned in the Old Testament as living throughout the Levant from approximately 2000-1200 BCE. Since they precede the Phoenicians, and because their homelands overlap, it has been frequently assumed that the Canaanites and the Phoenicians were the same people. The archaeological remains of the Phoenicians indicate that they developed steadily out of the older Canaanite cultures, but it is unclear how much genetic continuity there was.

Some of the things that made the Phoenicians so enigmatic were their fluid political boundaries and the role they had as conduits of the different cultures that existed around the Mediterranean world. "Phoenicia" was not a clearly demarcated and unified kingdom, with borders that separated it from its neighbors. Instead, it was a culture spread throughout a string of city states across the Mediterranean and beyond. To support their trade and travel the Phoenicians founded colonies with harbors and warehouses as ports of call, which served to break up the long journeys away from their homeland. Between 1200 BCE and 800 BCE the Phoenicians engaged in their first wave of colonization, during which they established trading posts at key locations around the Mediterranean, including those at Utica in 1101 BCE and at Carthage in 814 BCE. Between 800 BCE and 600 BCE, these trading posts started becoming full colonies, and over time some would eventually surpass their mother cities in wealth and power.

To get a sense of the extent of the Phoenician sphere of influence, it is useful to imagine being on a vessel setting off from their coastline on a journey that will go around the Mediterranean and beyond. Such a journey began in the Phoenician mainland. The building block of their civilization and trade was the cedar wood of Lebanon, an excellent timber that was used to build sturdy cargo vessels and warships. After building the ships, the Phoenicians then

used those ships to transport cedar to other powers in the Mediterranean world. 3,000 years ago the Mount Lebanon range was covered in cedar forests, and the timber was primarily traded through Baalbek, situated in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains.

Seafaring merchants were evidently free to go where the market and winds took them. Traveling along the northern coasts of the Mediterranean, Phoenician traders would have stopped at their colony of Motya, in present-day Sicily. A bronze statue was recovered there in 1979 known as the Youth of Motya. The form of this figure is said to resemble the Tyrian deity Melqart, indicating that cross-cultural exchanges were taking place between Phoenicia and Motya by approximately 480 to 450 BCE.[28]

Then they traveled on to their rich colonies at Majorca and Sardinia. Without gold deposits of their own, the Sardinians must have acquired this commodity from the Phoenician traders. The forms of some of the rings and amulets found there indicate that the Phoenicians themselves worked the gold in the colonies, creating them according to standardized designs in small molds.[29] In return, the Phoenicians acquired glass ointment jars, necklaces, and amulets.

The commanders of the Phoenician fleets had to have many skills. Not only did they have to have an expert knowledge of the Mediterranean Sea and foreign lands, they also had to know the art of trading between diverse cultures as well. Many scholars believe that Phoenicians were amongst the earliest people to identify the North Star and use it to navigate during their voyages.[30] For years scholars speculated as to how the Phoenicians managed to communicate with each other on their voyages, and how they organized the complex trade of such a variety of goods. It was the discovery of the sarcophagus of the Phoenician king Ahiram, which dates to the 13th century BCE, that helped archaeologists understand their great organizational skills. Engraved in the sarcophagus is a bas relief-image and one of only five known examples of inscriptions from the language of the Phoenician city of Byblos.[31] The

Phoenicians developed a phonetic alphabet that influenced the way that people write today; Europa, sister of Cadmos of Tyre, was a historical figure that allegedly introduced the alphabet to the Greeks, who copied and adapted it before the Romans further developed it into the Latin script that the West uses today.

In addition to being outstanding sailors, the Phoenicians were famed shipbuilders. They mass-produced ships, and could replace lost vessels with great speed. At the shipyards of Carthage, all of the parts of their ships were clearly marked by different letters or symbols, and kept ready for quick assembly.[32] However, crossing the seas was no easy matter, even with the help of a good ship, and help from the gods was sought during their voyages across the Mediterranean.

By approximately 1100 BCE the Phoenicians had reached the western gateway of the Mediterranean, beyond the Pillars of Hercules at the isthmus of Gibraltar and south along the Atlantic beaches of Africa between Morocco and Guinea. The Pillars of Hercules were known by the Phoenicians as the Pillars of Melqart, named after their primary deity, the god of storms and mythical ruler of Tyre.[33] The Phoenicians were some of the only Mediterranean cultures brave enough to venture into the Atlantic; many others believed that beyond the Pillars of Hercules was nothing more than the edge of the world.



The Pillars of Hercules (European in the foreground and North African in the background)

To reckon with the hazards of venturing so far the Phoenicians struck a spiritual bargain with their gods. At Gorham's Cave, located at the base of the Rock of Gibraltar, archaeologists have discovered many thousands of talismans, rings, amulets and other finely crafted tiny items that are believed to have been deposited there by passing Phoenicians as votive offerings to create an alliance with their deities.[34]



Gorham's Cave

Arriving in Africa, the Phoenicians would lay out their wares on the beach before returning to their ships and sending up massive plumes of smoke. Local communities would see the smoke and place the gold they were offering in exchange beside the merchandise before withdrawing with their goods.[35] African cultures were very taken with the goods from the east, which was so different from the yellow metal that was found in abundance there. This was the great bargain of the Phoenicians, and it's indicative of their shrewdness as traders, leaving inexpensive pottery and jewelry before returning home with precious commodities.

Excavations in England have revealed that the Phoenicians may have reached even these far-off lands.[36] There they traded for skins, but tin seems to have been the major commodity sought there by the Phoenicians, as it was in great demand in the eastern Mediterranean for producing bronze and other alloys. These voyages in the storms of the North Atlantic always held the portent of danger, and according to wall-reliefs found in the Near East the brave Phoenician captains may have safeguarded their ships and cargoes by tying

themselves to the bow, so that they could see more clearly and avoid cliffs and rocky shoals.[37] If they made it, the returning ships would almost always stop off at the Phoenician colony of Cadiz (present-day Spain), where they would trade for iron.[38]

On their way home along the southern Mediterranean the Phoenician merchants would have stopped at their colony of Carthage, which had been founded in the late 9th century BCE as the Phoenicians extended their reach across the Mediterranean. From its roots the colony grew to dominate the region, eventually surpassing the power of its founders. Their ships might also have sailed up the Nile to Memphis and the kingdoms of the pharaohs. Their presence is indicated by a foreign quarter called the “Tyrian Camp” located a short distance south of the temple of Hephaestus in Memphis.[39]The Egyptian pharaohs treasured cedar for its fragrant resin, and the Phoenicians would have traded this wood for linen–a hard-wearing fabric that only the Egyptians knew how to make. This material was indispensable for the robust sails used on Phoenician ships. Egyptian amulets were also greatly valued by the Phoenicians because of the magical powers they were believed to possess.[40] Two kings of the Phoenician city of Sidon, Tabnit and his son Eshmunazar II, were buried in Egyptian sarcophagi complete with Phoenician inscriptions, and they were even mummified in the Egyptian style.

Finally, Phoenician traders completed the loop by returning to the Phoenician mainland. There, they could turn their commercial interest to the East, where they sold their commodities to the Persians and to their fellow countrymen. They would be left with a whole lot more wealth than they used to pay for the original cedar in Baalbek. But what was it that pushed the Phoenicians so far across the sea? It was gold. The Phoenicians existed at the edge of great land-based empires that were constantly exacting tribute from them. This served as a major push-factor, as they had to acquire wealth to make these payments (the pull factor being that they could also make great wealth for themselves). The easiest way for the Phoenicians to increase their prosperity was by contact with other

peoples, and the quickest route to new lands and new cultures was across the Mediterranean. Therefore, they became outstanding sailors and astute traders.

While sailing beyond the Straits of Gibraltar was truly an incredible feat for the time, and those trips are well documented by remains left by the Phoenicians, the Phoenicians are also credited with a journey that still amazes people. According to Herodotus, the Egyptian king Nekau II (610-595 BC) commissioned a Phoenician expedition to sail around Libya–the word the Greeks used for all of Africa outside of Egypt. Apparently, the expedition began somewhere in the Nile Delta (probably the capital city of Memphis) and then traveled through man-made canals until it reached the Red Sea, where it began its long sea voyage. Herodotus wrote, “In view of what I have said, I cannot but be surprised at the method of mapping Libya, Asia, and Europe. The three continents do, in fact, differ very greatly in size. Europe is as long as the other two put together, and for breadth is not, in my opinion, even to be compared to them. As for Libya, we know that it is washed on all sides by the sea except where it joins Asia, as was first demonstrated, so far as our knowledge goes, by the Egyptian king Neco, who, after calling off the construction of the canal between the Nile and the Arabian gulf, sent out a fleet manned by a Phoenician crew with orders to sail round and return to Egypt and the Mediterranean by way of the Pillars of Heracles. The Phoenicians sailed from the Red Sea into the southern ocean, and every autumn put in where they were on the Libyan coast, sowed a patch of ground, and waited for next year’s harvest. Then, having got in their grain, they put to sea again, and after two full years rounded the Pillars of Heracles in the course of the third, and returned to Egypt. These men made a statement which I do not myself believe, though others may, to the effect that as they sailed on a westerly course round the southern end of Libya, they had the sun on their right–to northward of them. This is how Libya was first discovered to be surrounded by sea, and the next people to make a similar report were the Carthaginians.” (Herodotus, *Histories*, IV, 42-43).

This passage reveals some interesting points, particularly the fact that Herodotus does not believe the account without stating his reasons. Perhaps he found the crew’s statement of the position of the sun confusing and unbelievable and therefore deduced that they lied, but the science supports the account. If they sailed around Africa starting in the Indian Ocean, then the sun would have been exactly where Herodotus stated it was. At this point, Herodotus’ account cannot be corroborated by any other primary sources, but it is amazing to consider that a crew of Phoenicians may have been the first people to circumnavigate Africa, over 2,000 before Vasco de Gama did it for Portugal in the late 15th century.

Sidon as an Early Phoenician City

Once Sidon was ruled by the Phoenicians, it experienced a great expansion between 1900 and 1225 BCE, extending its influence throughout the Mediterranean basin. Ancient sources provide some of the earliest textual descriptions of Sidon and the Phoenicians. The Egyptians wrote about the legendary “sea peoples” that occupied the Lebanese coast from approximately 1200 BCE. Their culture was believed to have assimilated with that of the Canaanites, and in doing so many of the longest-lasting customs and styles of Phoenician culture were formed.[41] The accounts of the Greek historian Herodotus provide the name of one of the earliest known kings of Sidon – Tabnit, who reigned from at least 525 BCE.[42]

From almost the moment the Phoenicians became the masters of Mediterranean trade, Sidon appears to have had a special relationship with Egypt. A colony of Phoenician merchants was established at Memphis from an early date, and through them a great quantity of rare and luxurious goods were brought from Egypt to the Lebanese city states.[43] There they exchanged cedar, which was particularly valued for its distinct fragrance, for Egyptian amulets and linen, which was used by the Phoenicians to craft their sails.[44] Under the reign of Pharaoh Necho II (610 – 595 BCE) an Egyptian fleet managed to circumnavigate the African coast, driven by a crew

from Phoenicia.[45] They left from the Suez Gulf and two years later passed through the Pillars of Hercules into the Mediterranean Sea.

At least two kings of Sidon, Tabnit and his son Eshmunazar II, and a great number of other Sidonian nobles were buried in Egyptian stone sarcophagi. That of Tabnit originally belonged to an Egyptian general, Penephtah (Twenty-sixth Dynasty, approximately 600 – 525 BCE), and was inscribed in the Phoenician script after being imported from Egypt. King Tabnit was even mummified in the Egyptian style.[46]

However, there were limits to their loyalty with Egypt. In the long conflict between the Egyptians and the Hittites for control of the Levantine coast, Sidon played an instrumental role; unlike the cities of Tyre and Byblos, which remained loyal to the pharaoh, Sidon was associated with the Habiru group allied with the Hittites.[47] It would be this juxtaposition with the land-based empires of the ancient Near East that would later completely transform Phoenician society.

Furthermore, the Phoenicians did not only engage in maritime commerce, as merchants in the Phoenician mainland sold local and imported commodities to their Near Eastern neighbors and even further afield. A colony of Sidonian merchants was established at the city of Maresha, in southern Israel, during the second century BCE. They left behind magnificent subterranean tombs dug into the chalky limestone of the landscape surrounding the city.[48] The cave-tombs are covered with frescoes depicting incense burners, vases, architectural elements, and a menagerie of real and mythical animals, including three-headed dogs, chickens, eagles, hippopotami, and rhinoceroses.

Sidon quickly distanced itself from the other city states of Phoenicia, such as Tyre and Byblos, in terms of commercial and colonial activity. The city became renowned for its trade in cedar and the fine construction of their ships. It was popular amongst merchants both local and foreign, whose ships could take advantage

of the city's two harbors, a double-harbor facing the south known as the "Egyptian Port" and the other facing the north.[49] For these reasons, Sidon was considered the primary Phoenician city until Tyre overtook it around 1200 BCE.

Centuries later, Sidon was conquered by the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II in 877 BCE.[50] Many other Phoenician cities had already fallen to his armies, submitting to the king's will and agreeing to pay tribute. Bas-reliefs at the Assyrian city of Nineveh attest to the great value they placed on Lebanese cedar wood sent there as tribute.[51] Otherwise, the Assyrian incursion appears to have been of little hindrance to the commercial activities of Sidon, and the city continued to grow in wealth.

Nevertheless, the lack of complete independence was not accepted by the whole population, and in the early years of his reign the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon (r. 681 – 669 BCE), son of Sennacherib, faced revolts in the city. After besieging the city for three years, he re-conquered the city, destroyed many of its buildings, and deported its inhabitants to other areas of the empire.[52] He erected a new city in its place, which quickly became wealthy once again, and by 677 BCE the city-state's territory encompassed the coast as far north as Batroun and south to the Litani River delta, north of Tyre.



An Assyrian depiction of Ashurnasirpal II

The Bible and other Christian texts have served as key sources of information for the early history of the Phoenicians. Even 3,000 years ago, religious conflict swarmed around the land of Lebanon. The Phoenicians were maligned as idol-worshippers, cheaters, and generally negative associations were made between the wealth and beauty of their ancient cities such as Sidon, which were said to be beds of corruption and squalor. The Old Testament prophets give some indication of the city-state in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE. Sidon had evidently recovered from the blow it suffered a century earlier under Esarhaddon, but at this point in time it no longer surpassed the commercial power of Tyre, as indicated by one text that describes in allegory their position in the Levant: “The inhabitants of Sidon and Arvad were your rowers; your wise men, O Tyre, were aboard; they were your pilots.”[53]

The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel made a number of prophecies concerning the fate of Sidon: “Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against you, O Sidon, and I will be glorified in your midst. Then they will know that I am the Lord when I execute judgments in her, and I will manifest my holiness in her. For I will send pestilence to her and blood to her streets, and the wounded will fall in her midst by the sword upon her on every side; then they will know that I am the Lord.”[54] His prophecies made similar mentions of the violent and ultimate destruction of Tyre, the sister-city of Sidon. These claims may have been heavily influenced by the contemporary conquest of Phoenicia by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II, but were also strangely portentous of the events that would later transpire under Alexander the Great.

King Nebuchadnezzar II besieged Tyre between 585 and 572 BCE and captured the mainland portion of the city, Ushu.[55] There is no evidence of the destruction of Sidon by Nebuchadnezzar, though Ezekiel hinted that this may have occurred: “There also are the chiefs of the north, all of them, and all the Sidonians, who in spite of the terror resulting from their might, in shame went down with the slain. So they lay down uncircumcised with those slain by the sword and bore their disgrace with those who go down to the pit.”[56]

The losses suffered by Tyre must have been greater though, as Sidon once more took the advantage and for a time reigned supreme in Phoenician commerce once again. Indeed, the Golden Age of Sidon was still to come. In 538 BCE, the mighty Babylonians collapsed under the force of the Persian Empire. Exceeding the wealth and splendor enjoyed by many of its inhabitants, the city reached the peak of its power during the period of Persian rule.

Sidon and the Persians



A Persian style bull statue found in Sidon

Long-distance maritime trade was not the only way that the wealth of the Phoenicians was tapped into by the other great powers of the region. Initially, Sidon was free from the yoke of Persian dominance, but by the 5th century BCE the Persian Empire stretched from Egypt to the Black Sea, and from Asia Minor to the edges of India. Although the Persians had a strong army, they were nomadic conquerors who expanded their empire through political power rather than force. As such, while the great empire exacted tithes and demanded tributes from the coastal city-states of Sidon and Tyre,[57] Sidonian religions and local traditions were respected. This was a

major push-factor for the Phoenician traders, who sought greater wealth with which to make these payments, and even enough of a profit to prosper, through contact with new lands and new cultures.

From the 6th-4th centuries BCE Sidon served as the capital of the Persian satrapy, a period that is marked by the appearance of a monetary economy, and the revival of art.[58] The city was ruled by two dynasties during the Persian period (539-333 BCE), the Eshmunazor and the Baalshillem, of which some 14 kings have been identified and named.[59] Much of what is known of the genealogy of the Sidonian kings has come from Persian sources and numismatics, though the dating of the reigns of the Eshmunazor is imprecise. King Eshmunazor I was the first named ruler of Phoenician Sidon, and he reigned over the city during the last quarter of the 6th century BCE, though very little is known of his reign. The life of his son and successor is also shrouded in mystery, but a little more is known of his death. This was Tabnit, previously mentioned as having been buried in an Egyptian sarcophagus and in the texts of Herodotus. King Tabnit married his aunt, the sister of Eshmunazor I, Amoashtart.[60]

Some of the most archaeologically valuable sites in Sidon dating from the period of Phoenician rule are the city's three necropolises: Magharat Tabloun, Ain el-Halwi and Ayaa. Of these the Ayaa Necropolis was the most interesting. Ransacked by the Ottomans in the late 18th century, the site has nonetheless revealed a great number of exceptional artifacts and burials that tell much about the role of Sidon in the wider world.[61] It was there that the sarcophagus of King Tabnit was found, the mummy within still partially preserved. Tabnit's body was bounded in sycamore within the basalt coffin, and his head surrounded by a gold headband.[62] In the necropolis of Magharat Tabloun a similar discovery was made in 1855: an Egyptian sarcophagus of basalt belonging to Eshmunazor II, the son of Tabnit.

King Tabnit died before his son was born, and in the interregnum period Amoashtart ruled the city. When her son, Eshmunazor II, was born, she continued to serve as co-regent until he came of age in the later 6th century.[63] Eshmunazor II expanded the territory of his city-state into the fertile Sharon Plain, northern Israel, which was gifted to him by the Persian emperor.[64] It was therefore under the rule of king Tabnit and his two successors that the Phoenician city-states were gradually either conquered or bound by treaty to the Persian empire by Cyrus II (549 – 530 BCE).[65]

Under the rule of King Eshmunazor II and his mother the sanctuary of Eshmun was constructed close to the city. Eshmun was the Canaanite and Phoenician god of healing, and the patron god of Sidon.[66] His temple was one of the most important religious sites in the ancient world, and pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean traveled to Sidon to visit it. The sacred complex consisted of an open courtyard surrounded by chapels, immense podiums, housing for priests, and warehouses containing religious objects and votive sculptures. It is not known exactly what rites and rituals took place in the complex, though an absence of burials means that it was unlikely associated with death. Instead, the imagery of the site indicates a closer relationship with healing and life. A large carved frieze on one of the stone walls depicts a scene of hunting processions and children's games.[67] Another frieze dating from the mid-4th century BCE depicts a procession of Hellenistic deities, including Dionysus, Apollo, and Athena, which indicates that by this time Greek styles of cult worship were becoming increasingly popular in the region.[68] On another isolated block a carved relief depicts a young boy with a cloak around his waist holding glass beads attempting to catch a rooster. This refers to the practice by which a sick rooster was sacrificed to Eshmun.[69]

In the lower part of the complex was a sanctuary dedicated to Ishtar, also known by the Greeks as Astarte. It consisted of a paved pool and a square room which contained an empty throne.[70] Carved from a single block of granite, this cult statue was flanked on either

side by armrests in the form of sphinxes decorated in a pharaonic style trim. Also surrounding it were a number of carved lions. Worshippers of Eshmun and Ishtar may have bathed in the sacred waters of the temple to receive healing.[71] Eshmunazor II constructed conduits from the Awali River to the temple area, of which some are still used to this day, such as the Sultani Canal.[72] A number of other temples were built in the city under the orders of Eshmunazor II. He was succeeded upon his death by Bodashtart, the son of an unnamed sibling of Tabnit and Amoashtart, who expanded the temple of Eshmun sometime in the 530s BCE.[73]

King Bodashtart was succeeded by his son Yatonmilk, who was succeeded by Anysos, but little is known of the reign of these kings.[74] At an unknown date Tetramnestos came to the throne, and under his rule, Sidon played a key role in the Battle of Salamis that took place on September 23, 480 BCE between the mighty Greek and Persian civilizations.

The Persian emperor, Xerxes, was obsessed with avenging his father's defeat by the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, and he would only be satisfied when Athens was destroyed. From all over the empire Xerxes recruited hundreds of thousands of men – the largest army the world had ever seen – and with this force amassed, he prepared to lead his men into Europe. There were not enough boats to carry an army of such size, so Xerxes moved most of them by land through Asia Minor while the mighty Persian fleet would follow along the Anatolian coast. The main component of the Persian maritime force at this time was the Sidonian fleet commanded by King Tetramnestos.[75]



A depiction of Xerxes

Xerxes was initially triumphant. He conquered almost all of the northern Greek cities, and eventually sacked Athens (which had been abandoned, the population having moved to the nearby island of Salamis).[76] But he still had to destroy the Greek fleet of newly-designed Athenian triremes, led by Themistocles. Built from oak, these new ships were light and fast, making them easy to maneuver.[77] Long and streamlined, each galley was designed to hold three levels of oarsmen – 170 rowers in all. To frighten their enemy, the beaks of these boats were painted with fearsome faces.[78] This

would be the secret weapon of the Athenians, a “wall of wood” prophesized by the oracle at Delphi as being that which would save the city.[79]



A bust of Themistocles

Xerxes joined the Sidonian fleet, and sailed towards the Bay of Salamis, where the Greek fleet was trapped. Outnumbering them by

three to one, the Persians were confidant of their victory, and Xerxes found a nearby hill from which he could watch the ensuing skirmish.

As it turned out, the Greeks knew the lay of their own land and sea far better than the Sidonians and Persians. They waited patiently for the winds to turn to their advantage, taking advantage of the narrow space of the Bay of Salamis. The battle began when a Greek trireme crashed into a Sidonian ship, splitting its deck and spilling sailors into the turbulent sea.[80] Although the Persian fleet initially seemed like they had the advantage, as the battle progressed, they became increasingly ensnared in the narrows of the bay, and the more maneuverable Greek ships wreaked havoc upon them. There were so many ships in the bay that it became almost impossible to tell Greek from Sidonian or Persian, yet by the end of the day, more than 200 Persian ships were sunk – the majority of which had come from Sidon.[81] The Greeks lost only 40.

There were many casualties on both sides, among them the brother of Xerxes.[82] Disheartened and infuriated, Xerxes returned to the Persian homeland, leaving his men to carry on the fight. By then, he realized that after having lost the Sidonian fleet and lacking the command of the sea, he would never control Greece.

Tetramnestos survived the Persian disaster of Salamis, and continued to rule over Sidon for a period of time.[83] The exact year in which Tetramnestos died is unknown, and there is a lengthy stage of Sidon's history in which little is known until the next named king, Baalshillem I, came to power as the first ruler of the Baalshillem dynasty. Baalshillem I was followed by Abdamon, Baana, and eventually Baalshillem II (r. 401 – 366 BCE).[84]

From approximately 450 BCE, Sidon began to mint its own coins. Known as the shekel, these originally depicted a simple iconography, but one of the most significant results of the reign of Baalshillem II was the practice of dating the coins produced in the city. It is not known for what reason he chose to do this, but from at least 372

BCE all coins made in the city featured the year of the ruling king's reign, enabling present-day numismatists to establish an absolute chronology for the Sidonian kings of the late Persian period.[85]

Baalshillem II was an intensely pious man. A great number of life-sized votive statues of children were deposited in the Temple of Eshmun during his rule. These statues reflect the role of the Temple of Eshmun as a place where sick children were brought to be cured. The most remarkable of these is the so-called "temple-boy" statue. The sculpture's form is indicative of Sidon's legacy as a bridge between cultures; its athletic body and straight nose are reminiscent of the *kouros* style bodies popular in archaic Greece, it has Egyptian-style almond-shaped eyes, and a distinctly Phoenician cloak.[86] Around this statue were discovered more than 3,000 glass beads that may have been used by children brought to the temple to play with during the ceremonies.

Another statue of a later date is in the form of a boy with a shaved head, bare chest, and lower body wrapped in a large towel, holding a pigeon in his right hand and a turtle in his left. At the base of the statue was an inscribed message to the gods: "This (is the) statue which Baalshillem son of King Ba-na, king of the Sidonians, son of King Abdamun, king of the Sidonians, son of King Baalshillem, king of the Sidonians, gave to his lord Eshmun at the Ydl Spring. May he bless him!"[87]

In 398 BCE, during the fourth year of the reign of King Baalshillem II, Sidon found itself involved in the Corinthian War, a complicated conflict between the Athenians, Achaemenid Persians, and the Spartans. Most of the fighting during this war took place near Corinth in the Peloponnese in Greece, as Argos, Athens, Corinth and Thebes had formed a coalition against the Peloponnesian League and its allies. The Spartans under Agesilaus II had threatened the Persians by invading Asia Minor, present-day Turkey – a location that would have allowed the Spartan armies to launch an attack deep into the heart of the Persian Empire.[88] Persian money – likely

that gathered as tribute from the city states of the Levant, such as Sidon – was being used to fund the Corinthians and their allies to fight the Spartans.[89] However, the initial attack of this coalition failed and they suffered massive losses.

By the early 4th century BCE the Spartans had managed to create a sizable fleet, with which they not only threatened the Aegean Sea but the wider eastern Mediterranean as well.[90] The Spartan fleet was under the command of the Spartan general Pisander when, in 398 BCE, they sailed out from their harbor at Cnidus. They were met by a combined Persian-Athenian fleet, which had been constructed in secret. At the resulting Battle of Cnidus, a fleet of ships from Sidon was led by King Baalshillem II, and are recorded as having played the main role in the conflict.[91] The details of the battle itself are sketchy – it appears as though the Spartan fleet did well against the Sidonians initially, but at some point they were forced to beach many of their ships. As a result, the Spartans lost their entire fleet, decisively ending their attempt to establish a naval empire, and Athens would go on to reclaim its place as the major sea power of the Aegean.[92]

Upon his victorious return, Baalshillem II appointed his young child, Abdashtart I, to be his successor.[93] Before that, however, Baalshillem II continued to serve the Persians as a vassal, sending Sidon's ships to help the emperor during his campaigns in Egypt between 385 and 383 BCE, which again ended in failure.[94] Sidon's fleet was heavily damaged by these failed expeditions, and as a result the city did not take part in the Persian invasion of Cyprus in 381 BCE.[95] However, the efficient shipyards of the city worked tirelessly to rebuild their warships, and the city was once again called upon to contribute to a campaign organized by the Persian emperor to crush a number of his satraps.[96]

After the king's death in 365 BCE, Abdashtart I came to power, and the new ruler of Sidon faced severe economic and political difficulties: Phoenician coinage had been steadily decreasing in

value; they suffered from crippling tithes due to the Persian emperor; at some point in the 4th century BCE the Temple of Eshmun had been destroyed by an earthquake, and the cult was gradually diminishing as the sacred pool of Ishtar filled with soil and the fragments of its votive statues.

Although but a young boy when he ascended the throne, Abdashtart I ruled the city for 14 years. Abdashtart I and his successors ruled the city alongside a Persian official called Mazday (r. 353 – 333 BCE) who had been appointed by the emperor, Artaxerxes III, to rule the province of Eber-Nari, of which Sidon was a major city and perhaps even the capital.[97] This was in response to a series of revolts that took place there under the rule of Abdashtart I. Mazday produced his own coins in the town mint, albeit making them according to local iconographic and dating conventions rather than the more familiar system of his homeland.[98]

Tennes succeeded Abdashtart I in 351 BCE, though it is unknown if he was a son or other relative and thus continued the Baalshillem dynasty or came from some other lineage.[99] In 347 BCE, King Evagoras came to the throne after a revolt,[100] but his rule was brief because he was executed by the Persians the following year and replaced by the Cypriot king Evagoras II.[101] This foreign ruler reigned for just four years, and was replaced once more by a Sidonian, Abdashtart II, in 342 BCE.[102]

The rule of Abdashtart II was comparatively lengthy, and for this period of time the city once more enjoyed a semblance of stability and growth. This only ended with the invasion of a new outside power – one that would shake not only Phoenician society, but cause the seemingly indomitable Persian Empire to crumble.

The Age of the Conquerors

In contrast to the benevolence of the Persians, who did not seek to acculturate the Sidonians or drastically change their ways of life, the

Hellenistic world was abhorrent of the Persians and their allies. After defeating the Achaemenid Persian king, Darius III, at the Battle of Issus in 333 BCE, the illustrious Macedonian general Alexander the Great continued into the Levant. Alexander conquered the city that year, and it's possible that during the battle king Abdashtart II died, after having ruled Sidon for 10 years.[103]



Andrew Dunn's picture of a bust of Alexander

Alexander allowed his general, Hephaestion, to choose who would be the new ruler of Sidon. Hephaestion installed a man of unlikely profession to be the vassal king, a gardener named Abdalonymus.

[104] Abdalonymus was chosen over Hephaestion’s two brothers as he was the only one who had royal blood.[105] Abdalonymus was later buried in a splendid sarcophagus known as the “Alexander Sarcophagus,” which was covered in bas-relief carvings of the Macedonian’s battles against the Persians.

Alexander’s conquests marked the beginning of the Hellenistic period in Sidon, and the art and culture of Greece deeply permeated the city between the conquest of Alexander and 64 BCE. This age was marked by improvements made to the city infrastructure, the use of the Greek language among all social classes, and the construction of a stadium, agora, and baths in the city, though few remains of these can be found in the modern landscape.[106]



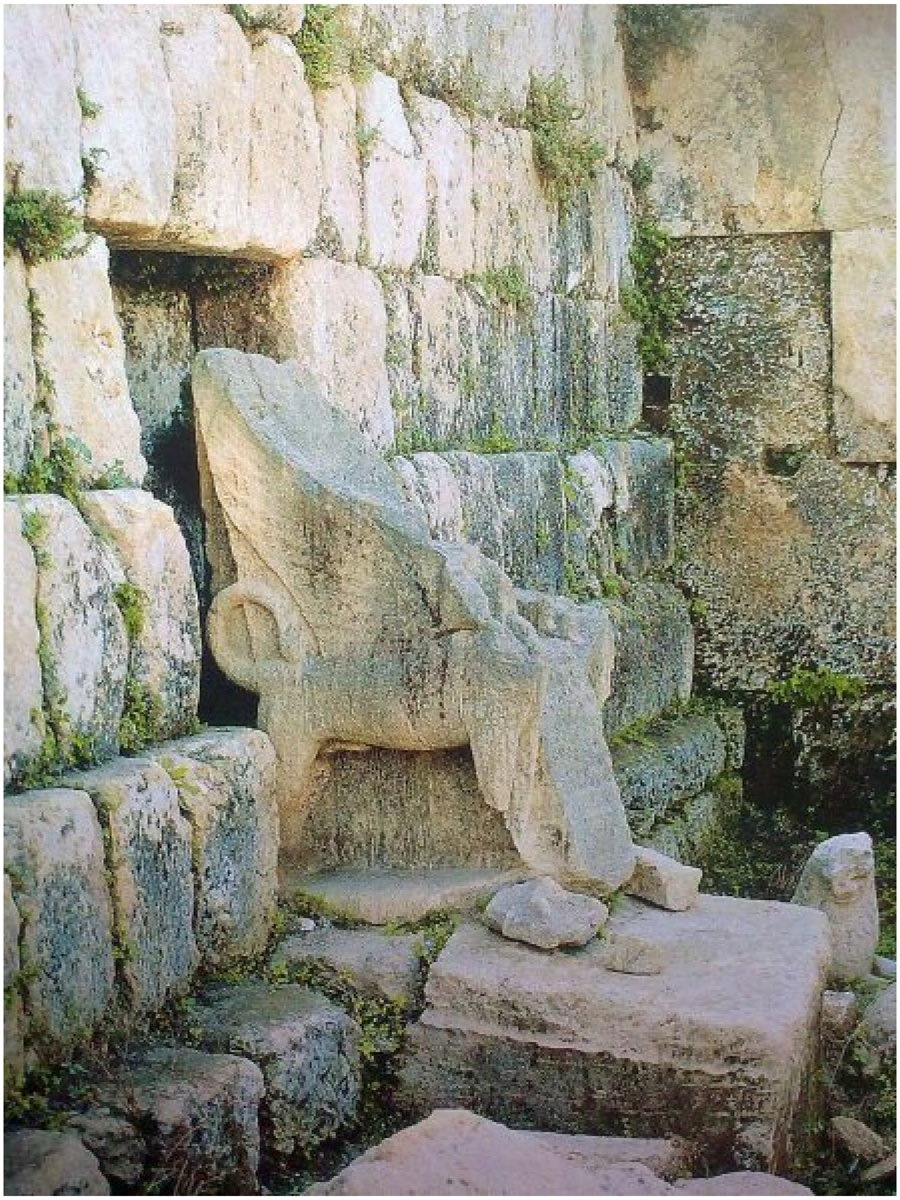
A picture of the Old City of Sidon



Carpenter's Alley in the Old City

During the three centuries of Roman rule between 64 BCE and 330 CE, Sidon enjoyed the benefits of living under the Pax Romana. The city had a large degree of autonomy granted to it by Marc Antony, despite the objections of Cleopatra (who perhaps recalled the city's turbulent relationship with Egypt).[107] While enjoying the same rights as all citizens of Rome – including religious freedom – the Sidonians initiated a revival in ambitious architectural projects in and around the city. The Temple of Eshmun was enlarged and seems to have been an active cult center once again, albeit for a pantheon that had somewhat changed from that practiced by the earlier Phoenicians.[108] The healing god Eshmun was then identified in the Greco-Roman pantheon as Asklepios (Aesculapius), the god of medicine best known for the image of two snakes entwined around a stick that represents him (and an image used today as a symbol for the medical profession). This image was used on a number of artifacts at

the sanctuary, and Roman coins issued in Beirut even show Eshmun standing in between two snakes.



Astarte's throne at the Eshmun temple



A picture of the temple's ruins



A votive statue of a child at the temple

Moreover, a processional route with ablution basins leading to a nymphaeum with mosaic floors was built by the Romans, with sculptures of nymphs filling the niches within, and later the Byzantines founded a church there.[109]



Picture of a Roman colonnade at the Temple of Eshum

Several notable Roman philosophers, astrologers, mathematicians and physicians came from or lived in Sidon. Mokhos was a smith born and raised in Sidon who moved to Miletus, a Greek city on the western Anatolian coast. There he studied at the school of Thales, a Phoenician-Greek philosopher who was the first individual to be recognized as having occupied himself in empirical scientific thought, driven by his desire to prove that the world was composed of water.[110] Mokhos developed on these ideas of a single overarching substance of life and became one of the founding thinkers in the school of atomism.

Boethus of Sidon was another distinguished Sidonian philosopher, born in the city in 75 BCE. He traveled extensively, studying under many of his most famous contemporary thinkers, including Andronicus of Rhodes and Strabo.[111]

Sidon was one of the first cities in Phoenicia to welcome the teachings of Jesus Christ, as mentioned in the New Testament. Jesus passed through the city on his journey to the Decapolis, a cluster of 10 important cities on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire, where he famously healed a deaf and mute man of his ailments.[112]

The division of the Roman Empire under the reign of Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379 – 395 CE) resulted in Sidon being passed into the hands of the Byzantines, rulers of the Eastern Roman Empire. The city became distinguished between 330 and 637 CE by its role in the production and distribution of silk.[113] However, in 551 CE an earthquake destroyed the Phoenician city of Beirut, and the resulting tsunami caused widespread destruction along the Phoenician coastline. An estimated 30,000 people perished in the disaster, and many of the coastal cities were reduced to ruins.[114] As a result, the privileged Law School of Beirut was transferred to Sidon. Together, these made the city one of the centers of learning and trade in the Levant once again.[115]

In the early 7th century the Byzantine emperors faced a new conquering force in Phoenicia as the Sassanid kings who swept over the Near East in 613 CE. In 637, Sidon, like many other cities on the coast, was conquered by the Sassanid general (and companion of Mohammad) Yazid ibn Abu Sufyan.[116] The Sassanids restored the city's defensive walls, and rebuilt the ancient Phoenician harbor.[117] From this point Sidon's role as a center of commerce was replaced by its new function, one that it would have for the next millennium – a maritime military base.

In 661, Muawiyah I, the governor of Syria and founder of the Umayyad Dynasty, was declared caliph. Sidon was renamed Saida, and the administration of this strategically important city became increasingly controlled by the Umayyad capital of Damascus. This was a time in which Islam spread across the region, and mosques were built in the city.[118] In 969, the Umayyads were replaced by the

Fatimid Dynasty based in Cairo, and later in the 11th century the Seljuk Turks of Anatolia presented a new threat to Byzantium and a new sphere of influence over Sidon. After the Byzantine forces were defeated by the Seljuks at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, Sidon was destined to face three centuries of invasions, the results of which continue to ripple throughout the region. This was the beginning of the crusades.

The Crusader City

The First Crusade resembled a pilgrimage as much as it did an invasion; the primary aim was the liberation of Jerusalem from the Arabs, but just as many priests and pilgrims came to the Holy Land as did soldiers.

After Manzikert, the Seljuks were in almost total control of Anatolia. The European armies were initially successful, due to dissent between the Abbasids, Fatimids, and Seljuks.[119] After the capture of Jerusalem in 1099, Godfrey of Bouillon, Duke of Lorraine and leader of the First Crusade, was proclaimed the first monarch of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Crusaders subsequently established strongholds in Phoenicia from which they were able to defend and control the Holy Land, and they quickly seized Antioch, Tripoli, Beirut and Tyre. Sidon, too, came under the control of the Crusaders in 1110. Sidon became the main manor of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, with the lord of Sidon ranking among the four most important vassals of the crown.[120] Throughout the entire history of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, Sidon was governed by the House of Grenier.

At this point the city's borders were bounded to the north by the Damour River Valley and to the south and east by the Litani River. This encompassed an area that included the fiefs of Aadloun, Sarepta, Chouf and Jezzine.[121] The frontier of this territory was defended by two impressive Crusader strongholds: Beaufort Castle, which overlooked the Litani River, and the Fortress of Niha, a castle

carved into the cliffs overlooking the road that linked Sidon with the fertile Beqaa valley.



David Germain-Robin’s picture of the ruins of Beaufort Castle



A picture of the Sea Castle

The city itself contained an additional two castles, and a warren of souks. The Castle of St. Louis was the earliest of the city’s castles, built by King Louis IX of France, who led a major campaign of restoring and repairing military constructions in the Holy Land between 1248 and 1254.[122] The fortress was located atop the ancient *tell* (mound) of southern Sidon, the site of a fortification built during the 10th century by Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the fourth caliph of the Fatimid dynasty (the presence of an even earlier structure is indicated by damaged Roman columns at the base of the mound).[123]



A souk in the Old City



Ruins of the Castle of St. Louis

South of the castle was an artificial mound over 350 feet long and 50 feet high formed of a most surprising material: snail shells. This was murex, a purple dye produced by the crushed shells of a marine snail local to the waters around the city which became famous under its later name of Tyrian purple.[124] Although Tyre was the most famous producer of this purple dye – which for thousands of years enjoyed a valued and varied history, being worn by the likes of Cicero and other members of the nobility in the Roman Empire and the Byzantine court – Sidon also contributed to the production and trade of the commodity.[125] Some fragments of mosaics discovered at the top of this hill attest to the presence of buildings during the Roman era, though these have otherwise almost completely disappeared.

In 1126, Sidon was threatened by an Egyptian fleet, but they were turned away.[126] This happened again in 1151, but these minor threats were nothing compared to the new powerful enemy that appeared on the horizon. In 1171, the last caliph of the Fatimid Dynasty, Nur ad-Din, died. Shortly afterwards a man called An-Nasir Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, commonly known as Saladin, successfully managed to remove all of his rivals in Syria and Mesopotamia, after which he assumed power over the Arabs in Damascus. In 1179, Saladin advanced upon Sidon, and though he devastated the farmland surrounding the city, he was unable to conquer it.[127] He repeated his attempt on Sidon three years later, but it was not until after the Siege of Tiberius in July 1187 that he finally managed to conquer it.[128] With the Crusaders crushed, Saladin moved on to the other Phoenician towns and consolidated Arab rule in Phoenicia.

During the Sixth Crusade, led by Frederick II, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, the European armies once again directed their attention towards Sidon. The sudden death of Al-Mu'azzam Isa, governor of Damascus, in November 1227 inspired the Crusaders to move towards Sidon from their stronghold in Acre, and they successfully captured the city.[129] During this second period of rule under the Europeans the city's walls were once again strengthened. The island of Kala't al-Bahr, located just outside of the harbor, was also fortified.[130] This was the second Crusader castle to be built in Sidon, the so-called Sea Castle built during the winter of 1227 on the rocky outcrop in the middle of the sea.[131] The stronghold was built of materials torn from Roman monuments and structures in the city. Construction occurred in several stages until 1291 . The castle is still accessible to this day via a solid stone bridge 80 meters long built by the Crusaders. It has been heavily restored, in particular the sections surrounding the western tower, and during the Ottoman period a small mosque was installed adjacent to the Templar chapel.

At some point during the 13th century Sidon's Great Mosque was built close to the sea, southwest of the souks.[132] This large

rectangular building of four bays was a formidable sight, with powerful buttresses and a tall minaret. Tradition has it that this building was formerly a church, but it is more likely that the structure was built by the Knights Hospitallers, also known as the Order of the Knights of St. John. The mosque was partially damaged by a storm in 1820, after which it was restored using ancient materials – this is seen in particular at the north vestibule which houses the ablutions fountain.[133]



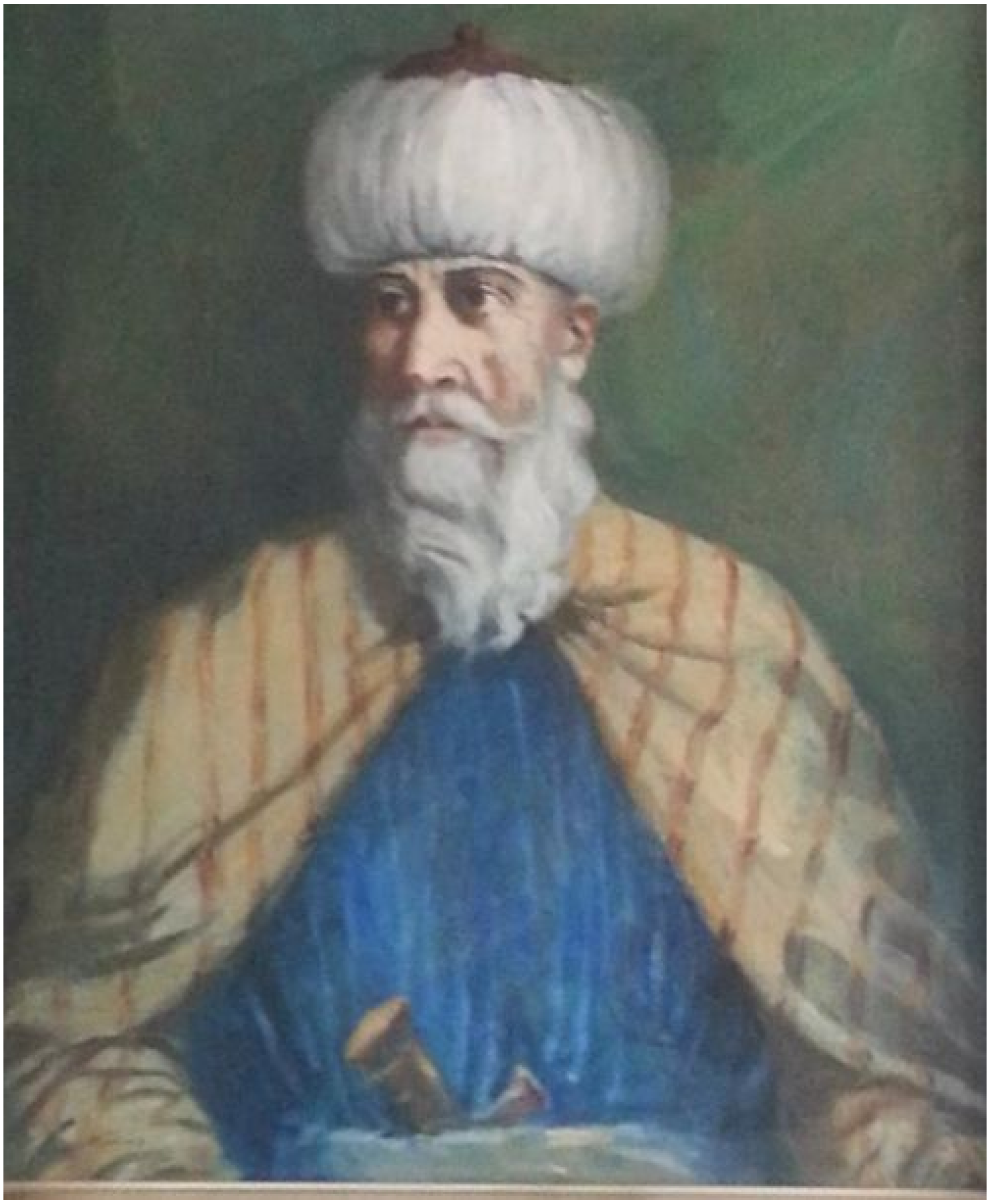
A picture of the mosque

In the spring of 1291, Mamluk forces under the command of Al-Ashraf Khalil moved up the Phoenician coast, capturing Acre and Tyre. In late June Sidon was also besieged by the Mamluk army, but it remained in the hands of the Crusaders until July.[134] Soon after the fall of Sidon the Mamluks captured Beirut, at which point the only Crusader territory on the coast was the Island of Ruad, known also as Arwad, located two miles from the coast.

Sidon never fully recovered from the disasters the city endured during the Crusades, and it never regained its past grandeur.

Sidon in the Modern Era

When Fakhr-al-Din ibn Maan was appointed emir of Lebanon in the 1610s, he decided to recover the territories and cities under control of the Ottomans, including Sidon.[135] The Ottoman government, worried of these attempts, exiled Fakhr-al-Din to Italy in 1613. However, in 1618 he was able to return to Lebanon, and from there he rallied an army of different ethnic groups – including the esoteric Druze, Christian Maronites, Sunnis and Shiites – with whom he eventually managed to win a brilliant victory against the Ottoman army led by Mustafa Pasha at the Battle of Anjar in October 1622.[136] To many, the campaigns and victories of Fakhr-al-Din mark the creation of an independent state of Lebanon.



Fakhr-al-Din

Sidon, formerly under Ottoman influence, became the capital of the emirate of Fakhr al-Din. Italian architects were commissioned to decorate a palace, public buildings, and gardens.[137] The mulberry orchards surrounding the city were cultivated, and once again the city became active in the production of silk. To encourage trade, Fakhr al-Din erected a great *caravanserai* where traveling merchants could take advantage of free accommodation, shops, and

warehouses for their goods. This monumental hotel was composed of a central rectangular courtyard surrounded on all sides by vaulted galleries and reception rooms, and served as the center of commercial activity in Sidon until the 19th century.[138] There was a notable community of French merchants who resided in this inn and eventually settled in the city and established their businesses there. They were joined by a group of Franciscans and members of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition who established an orphanage for girls. In 1697 the traveling English clergyman Henry Maundrell passed through Sidon, where he was greeted by these traders and took note of their “factory there, the most considerable of all theirs in the Levant.”[139] The French traders were mentioned again by Richard Pococke, an English clergyman and anthropologist, who wrote of the many civilities he received from the French merchants and of the abundance of apricots that grew in the city – a sign, he stated, of the city’s prosperity.[140]

Ultimately, however, boom under Emir Fakhr al-Din was short-lived. Commercial traffic into the city ceased when Fakhr al-Din closed off the city ports in an attempt to prevent the Ottomans from launching a sea-based attack. He loaded ships with stones until they sank to the harbor floor, and filled the gaps with further rocks and debris, meaning the city’s main port was only accessible by smaller boats.[141] This effectively paralyzed the city’s maritime trade potential.

Despite these measures, Fakhr al-Din lost control of the city, and in 1773 Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar was appointed as governor of Sidon. Based in Acre and simultaneously serving as governor of Acre and Damascus, the rule of al-Jazzar was tyrannical in comparison to that of Fakhr al-Din.[142] The citizens of Sidon were heavily taxed with impunity. In 1791, the French merchants of the city submitted a petition to the Ottoman Sultan, Selim III, accusing al-Jazzar of injustice. In retaliation al-Jazzar drove the merchants from the city.[143] They moved their businesses to Beirut and Tripoli, and trade in Sidon virtually ceased.



Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar

Until recently, the only information known about Sidon came from ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, and Biblical records. On their journey south to Jerusalem or north to Damascus, writers through the ages described with great enthusiasm the great beauty of the lush greenery that framed the city.

At the request of Emperor Napoleon III, teams of French archaeologists led by Ernest Renan engaged in excavations at Sidon during the 1860s. Renan had undertaken excavations in different areas of the Phoenician heartland, including Byblos, Tyre, Arwad, Tortosa, Amrit, Umm Kasr el-Awamid and Hiram.[144] His excavations focused on two of the main necropolises of the city, the Ayaa and Magharat Tabloun. The ancient sites of Sidon had been looted several times during the Middle Ages, in particular the city’s necropolises, but the French teams made spectacular finds – six anthropoid sarcophagi in marble and basalt, as well as fragments of

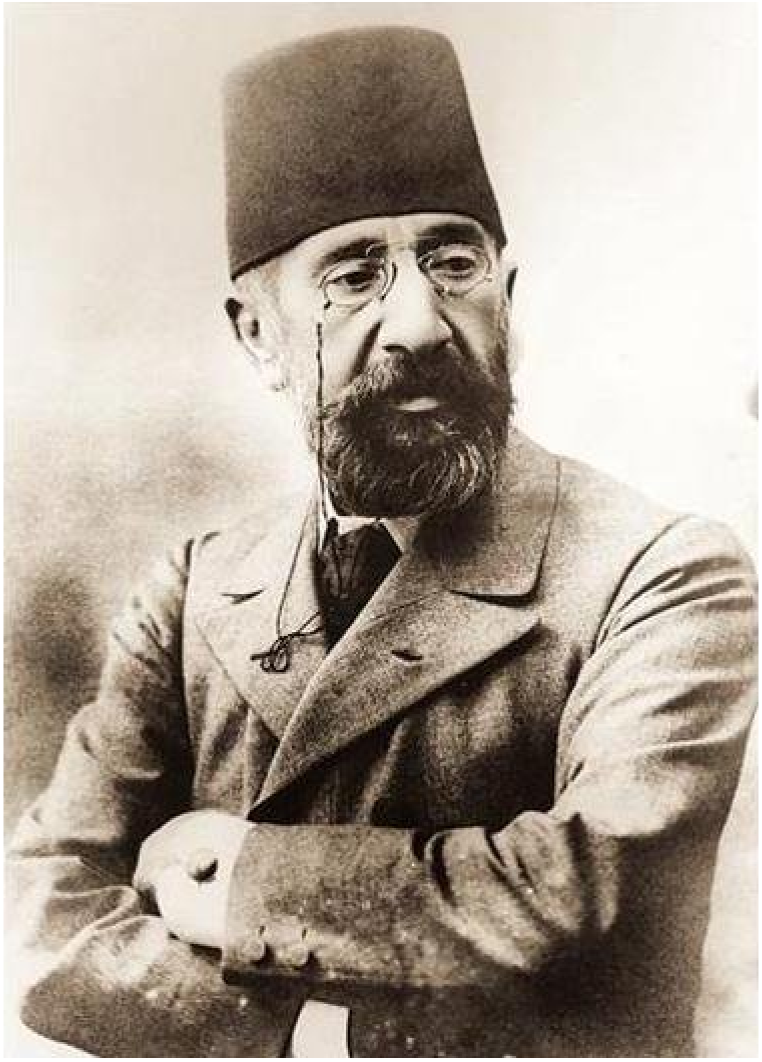
several other copies. Many small objects were also found: rings, bracelets, statues, alabaster vases, necklaces, keys, earrings, mirrors, lamps, and assorted glassware. In addition, a member of the team, a French doctor residing in Syria called Dr. Charles Gaillardot, mapped the whole area of this vast necropolis.



Renan

By 1872, Sidon had become a prosperous merchant city and an outpost for the American Protestant Mission, which built a school on the slope of Sidon's ancient mound. During the work on the foundations for the construction of their new college, large amounts of marble remains were discovered. Amongst these was a capital carved in the shape of two bulls, crouching back to back. It was thought by some that this may have been the area of a pleasure garden from the Persian period – the Apadana of Sidon, as mentioned by Diodorus of Sicily.[145]

The director of the Ottoman excavations of Sidon was Osman Hamdi Bey, one of the most renowned Ottoman-Greek archaeologists, artists, and museum curators who later founded the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul.[146] He was assisted by Yervant Voskan, an Ottoman-Armenian painter, sculptor and archaeologist.[147] Osman Hamdi Bey was sent to Sidon by Sultan Abdul Hamid II following the chance discovery in 1887 of a well and several sarcophagi by Sharif Mehmed Effendi, the landowner of the Ayaa Necropolis. Effendi had been looting the site for stone to be used in building works, and the necropolis silted up over time; by the 1880s, it was covered by a mound of earth, so a tunnel was carved into it by the archaeologists to access the monuments within. 17 sarcophagi were discovered by the Ottomans there, though only 10 were extracted. All of these were loaded onto a boat to be transported back to the Ottoman capital.



Osman Hamdi Bey

There has been a notable deficiency in textual sources recovered from Sidon and other Phoenician cities, due in large part to the environmental conditions of Lebanon. Although some monumental inscriptions have survived, many documents were not preserved in the damp and salty soil of the Lebanese coast.[148] Nonetheless, excavations that took place before the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), which caused almost all archaeology projects in the country to stop, led to the discovery of a number of extremely valuable and informative inscriptions in Sidon, Tyre, and other Phoenician settlements. For example, an inscription discovered at the Temple of

Eshmun in 1965 by Maurice Dunand, a French archaeologist, revealed the existence of an entirely unknown Sidonian dynasty.[149] The main trove of information came in the form of the vast quantities of Phoenician coins recovered in Sidon and its hinterland, the first collection of dated coinage from antiquity.[150]

The British Museum has been excavating in the Near East for well over 150 years, but the most important of their modern projects has been the investigation of Sidon's past. Under the guidance of Claude Doumet, an archaeological team has carried out a major excavation at the city. The mound area was eventually expropriated by the Lebanon Department of Antiquities as a site of major interest and remained untouched until 1988, the year the British Museum began its excavations. The steady revelation of layer upon layer of the city's past has been revealed, each showing a different kind of contact and local culture at Sidon. Dr. Doumet also worked in the vicinity of the ancient harbor. With core samples recovered from the sediment of the sea floor, she established the outline of the ancient harbor.[151]

As the ongoing work makes clear, Sidon was one of the oldest and most important cities of the ancient Near East. By the 3rd millennium BCE, the need for maritime markets sparked the establishment of port facilities, thereby expanding the size of early Bronze Age settlements in Phoenicia. From that point it had a turbulent history, but the medieval walled city continues to thrive, with its narrow alleys and tiny shop fronts. Dominated by the Crusader citadel, the city continues, as before, to be surrounded by vegetable gardens and fields of banana and apricot trees, coconut palms and citrus groves, even as the 21st century has encroached further and further into the small family-style holdings that have characterized the city since time immemorial. Although many Lebanese cities have managed to retain their classical and medieval charm, Sidon's old town is increasingly filled by boutiques and modern chains that at least partially work to obscure its fascinating story.

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